

Correspondence

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Dear Editor:

I am writing to protest the numerous mis-statements and libels on my father, Walter W. Liggett, that occurred in an article by Rosanne Sizer, "Herbert Hoover and the Smear Books, 1930-1932," published in *Annals of Iowa* [47 (Spring 1984), 343-61]. . . . Ms. Sizer's article contains numerous inaccuracies and libelous statements about my father and his book, *The Rise of Herbert Hoover*, which I feel I must correct. . . .

My major sources are (1) the book itself; (2) facts locatable through such common tools as the *New York Times Index* and the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*; (3) a manuscript collection [the Walter W. Liggett Papers, 1902-1931] at the New York Public Library; (4) FBI reports on Walter W. Liggett commissioned by Herbert Hoover; and (5) my own knowledge as the daughter of Walter W. Liggett. Another source that bears on the work is also accessible: my father's libel suit, *Liggett vs. Corey and Houghton Mifflin*, is available . . . at an annex of the County Clerk's office in New York City on the 7th floor of 31 Chambers Street. . . .

Here are some of Ms. Sizer's statements to which I object:

On page 346, Liggett's book is called an "unmitigated smear" book, even though on page 351, she notes that Liggett "at least conceded that Hoover had some good qualities and notable achievements" and quotes Liggett as saying, "there can be no question that as a geologist, mine manager, promoter, and financier he not only had remarkable natural aptitude, but made the most of his opportunities by unflagging study." (There are many other passages in the book that could have illustrated this point.) Her two statements contradict each other. The first is not true. . . . In fact, my father was consistently far more accurate and scrupulous in his biography of Hoover than Hoover has been in his references to Liggett.

On page 351, Ms. Sizer states: "In fact, Liggett plagiarized Hamill's book heavily, particularly in chapters dealing with Hoover's mining career." Telegrams and letters in the manuscript collection clearly indicate that Liggett's book was fully outlined in May 1931 and that several chapters were completed by July 1930. . . . The entire manuscript was completed in September 1931 with voluminous independent documentation of every point. Mr. Hamill's book did not appear until late October 1931. In his lawsuit, Liggett stated that he had never heard of Hamill until August 1931. He, himself, considered the biographies by John Knox and John Hamill "rather hasty." (Liggett file, letter to Robert Morse Lovett, Dec. 22, 1931.) . . . If the biographies

resemble each other at all, it may be because they both cover Hoover's life.

On page 351, Ms. Sizer states that "Liggett had been active in a postwar relief organization, The Friends of Soviet Russia. This pro-Soviet organization had been all but eliminated when Hoover took over direction of all Russian relief organizations in 1918." So far as I know, the organization in which my father was active was the American Committee for Russian Famine Relief, not the Friends of Soviet Russia. The time was 1921 and 1922; not prior to 1918. One of my father's objections to Mr. Hoover was that Hoover consistently misrepresented the Committee and my father's role in it. The project originated with a number of U.S. senators and representatives, and its purpose was to launch a campaign to raise relief for Russia through publicity, mainly in the Mississippi Valley, where little work was being done to raise funds for the famine in Soviet Russia. . . .

In January 1922, shortly after the Committee was launched, Mr. Hoover, then Secretary of Commerce under Harding, commissioned—through his assistant, Laurence Richey—an FBI investigation of Walter W. Liggett and the American Committee for Russian Famine Relief for alleged radical activities. . . . The resulting FBI report . . . supports the analysis above. . . . Congressman Keller [of Minnesota] volunteered [to the FBI agent assigned to the case], "I don't know whether you know this or not but Hoover, Secretary of Commerce, has been doing everything possible to discredit this fellow Liggett." . . .

Mr. Hoover—again through Laurence Richey—asked for another FBI report on Liggett on September 17, 1932 immediately after Liggett completed his biography of Hoover. This FBI summary report contained less information than could be gleaned from *Who's Who in America*.

On page 352, Ms. Sizer stated that "New York's *Outlook* disclosed the contemptible backgrounds of the authors." I do not know whether my father was supposed to be included, but it sounds so in context. There is nothing contemptible about my father's background—at the time he wrote Hoover's biography or subsequently. In fact my father contributed an article to *New Outlook* (the successor of *Outlook*) that same year [1932]. . . .

On page 360, Ms. Sizer states that "Liggett was murdered in a gang-land killing in Minneapolis in 1935." It is true that my father was shot by gangsters in Minneapolis in December 1935. I was a witness as a child of 10. However, the term "gang-land killing" implies that my father was somehow involved with gangsters other than as a reporter. This is not the case. He was murdered because his investigations

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brought out some connections between crime and politics in the state of Minnesota and the city of Minneapolis. A resolution adopted by the American Newspaper Publishers Association (*New York Times*, 24 April 1936) states, in part:

Whereas the oppressions of the press have been characterized by a campaign of violence against editors criticizing improper political gangster alliances, culminating in the murder of Walter Liggett; therefor be it

Resolved. That the press of this country should resist the attempts of such alliances in Minnesota or any other state to abridge the freedom of the press, whether the abridgement be attempted by lawlessness, legislation or by any other means.

Will Irwin, mentioned on page 354 of Sizer's article as a Hoover supporter, had clashed in print with my father over their differing interpretations of Hoover's life and character. Despite their hot clashes over Hoover, Irwin was so shocked by my father's assassination that he went to Minneapolis to report on it for *Liberty Magazine*. His article, "What is Behind the Minneapolis Murders?" appeared there in February 1936. He hoped that my father's death would at least have the effect of achieving reform in Minnesota. Unfortunately, my father's death led only to some publicity and very little reform. All that is left is his reputation.

I am sure that you would not want to smear an honest newspaperman in an article that purports to be on smears. I would have liked Ms. Sizer to demonstrate the same exactitude and thoroughness that she required of Hoover's biographers.

Marda Woodbury
Berkeley, California

Editor's Note: We have been unable to locate the author for a response.

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